

The Implanted Word

Sermon preached September 2, 2018

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church by the Rev. Dr. Deb DeMeester

James 1:17-27 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

*¹⁷ Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the **Creator of lights**, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ In fulfillment of God's own purpose God gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of the creatures.*

*¹⁹ You must understand this, **my beloved**: let everyone be **quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger**; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹ Therefore rid yourselves of all wretchedness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness **the implanted word** that has the power to save your souls.*

*²² **But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers** who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.*

*²⁶ If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: **to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.***

Many years ago, when I served as your Associate Pastor, I had the responsibility of doing the ice breaker for the Session retreat. In advance, I asked everyone to introduce themselves to the group as God might introduce them. I was excited about this exercise... I thought it would be a great way to explore the gifts we each brought as leaders to the Session! And so we started... The first person began, "This is my son, named, in whom I am so disappointed..." and he went on to explain the reasons for the disappointment and then others followed suit. I was so depressed by the end of the introductions that I hardly knew what to do... But a few years later, after singing six verses from a Methodist hymnal, about wretchedness, I knew

exactly what to do – and after a time of reflection which was a part of our scheduled time together at a conference – I came back and said “If this is how we think of ourselves, how in the world will God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven? We are called to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth, not to hide our light under baskets... In the gospel of John Jesus calls us to do even more than he did in his short time on earth.” Singing those verses caused something in me to change.

In seminary I was not a great fan of Church history classes but in recent years I am more than intrigued by how we got to where we are as the Church. I’m particularly intrigued by the history of the Roman Church and the Celtic traditions... Nearly 1500 years ago the Celtic Christians, distant from Rome and as a result independent of the Roman church as it was known at that time, “celebrated grace and nature as good gifts from God and recognized the sacredness of all creation. It had a love of mysticism and poetry, a deep respect for the feminine, included women in its leadership and allowed clerical marriages.” (<http://www.st-cuthberts.net/celhist.php>) The Roman Christians and Celtic Christians also differed in their understanding of the basic nature of human beings in significant ways – on the one hand, the belief that we are born depraved and must be born again; on the other hand, that (and quoting Julian of Norwich) recognizing the Light within all things, including yourself, is another way to acknowledge we are not only made by God, but of God.” End of quote – not depraved but created in the image and light of God.

Philip Newell suggests that the phrase “born again” “has been hijacked by religious fundamentalism [and to an extent by traditional Christianity itself] to give the impression that we need to become something other than ourselves.” It implies that we need to turn from what is deepest within us, including a denial of our human nature, because they believe that at our very core we are utterly sinful.

“As theologians and everyday people in church pews are reevaluating this claim of total depravity, more and more people are rejecting this historical assumption, and many have decided to leave organized religion altogether.” (Todd Freeman, 2015)

What if that which is deepest within each human life isn’t sinfulness, but rather the Sacred Presence of God? The Iona Abbey Worship Book states, “With people everywhere: we affirm God’s goodness at the heart of humanity, planted more deeply than all that is wrong.” End of quote. And in today’s

lesson James calls us to welcome the implanted word that has the power to save our souls... The implanted word...

Welcome the implanted Word... It is who we are – created by and of the Creator of Lights... For whatever reason, I think of a headlight implanted within each us designed to light the way, bring light into this world, finding those who are forgotten, seeking out those who are lost, bringing hope to those in despair... There are times when it seems that mud is ALL around us, covering up the light, darkening our lives and our witness... There are times we forget those words of Jesus “You are the light of the world” and we fall into believing there is no light to share. There are times when we need others to clean the light for us and remind us it is there. And that is okay for many Christians struggle. Flannery O’Connor says, “Christians ...are burdened by the fact that they have knowledge of an alternative world because they have encountered a God of grace and love that the world that they look at does not fit that which they have encountered.” But we are blessed to share the light. Indeed, at the end of our lives could there be a better tribute than to be honored as one who brought light into the lives of others – illumining the dark places, seeing the unseen, reaching out when our guts tell us to do so, receiving help when our lives demand it, listening when a heart needs to speak... ??

This week as the world said good-bye to some bright lights, I was drawn to the writing of Otis Moss in the book *Blue Note Preaching in a Post Soul World*. The book title reflects his belief that the only way to get rid of your blues is to speak to your blues. ... You have to see the mud on the headlight in order to clean it! As Ma Rainey said, “The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone.” ... The Blues dares us to celebrate all life and find the beauty in the midst of the magnificent mosaic of human contradiction.”

He tells the story of the time a few years when the church where he worked, Trinity Church in Chicago, was under attack because one of its members, Barak Obama, was running for President. “As a result, he says, we had media outside every day. There were death threats, at least a hundred every week: “We are going to kill you. We are going to bomb your church.’ You want to keep that sort of thing away from your family, but the stress was so painful and it made it difficult to sleep at night. He remembers one night he was half asleep and heard something in the house. His wife, Monica, punched him and said, “YOU go check that out.” He wrote, “So I did. Just like a good preacher, I grabbed my rod and staff to comfort me. I went walking

through the house with my rod and staff that was made in Louisville with the name 'Slugger' on it. I looked downstairs and then I heard the noise again and I made my way back upstairs and peaked in my daughter's room. There was a six-year-old girl dancing in the darkness... just spinning around and saying, 'Look at me, Daddy!' I said, "Makayla, you need to go to bed. It is 3:00 a.m. You need to go to bed!" But she said, "No, look at me, Daddy. Look at me." And she was spinning: barrettes going back and forth, pigtails going back and forth. I was getting huffy and puffy wanting her to go to bed, but then God spoke to me at that moment and said, "Look at your daughter! She's dancing in the dark. The darkness is around her but not in her. But she's dancing in the dark." End of quote

The darkness is around her but not in her. It is the implanted Word, the Light of God within her, bringing her out of bed to dance her joy, shining in the fear, shining in the darkness, shining in the tension.

May we be that light for someone this week. May we carry love, disguised as a proverbial cloth, that can bless those whose lights seem covered in mud so that maybe, just maybe, their own headlights will shine a bit more brightly – as we continue to pray and work for the day when God's kingdom DOES come on earth as it is heaven. Amen!

Suggested readings:

The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality by J. Philip Newell

Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality by J. Philip Newell